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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000370

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/29/2024

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SUBJECT: IRAN/RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: ASSYRIAN PENTACOSTAL
CHURCHES SHUT DOWN

Classified By: ConGen Istanbul Deputy Principal Officer Win Dayton; Reason 1.5 (d)

11. (C) Summary: According to the pastor of the largest Protestant Evangelical Church in Turkey (who also oversees the global church's evangelical missions in the Middle East), the Iranian Majles's Assyrian community representative, Jonathan Betkolia, asked an Iranian court in March 2009 to close the three Assyrian Pentecostal churches in Iran. The Majles member told the Church leaders that the Assyrian Pentecostal Church could only re-open if it agrees to bar non-Assyrian Christians from attending services, but the church refused and remains shuttered. Our contact visited Iran in early September to discuss the issue with church leaders. He returned to Turkey having concluded the closure is at an impasse, as church leaders neither want to pursue the case in Iranian courts, nor launch an international media/NGO campaign to pressure the regime, nor can they agree to the regime's conditions for re-opening. Comment: Our contact was not optimistic about prospects for a near-term re-opening of the churches, but would welcome USG advice on whether there are other steps that the church could take that might lead to a positive outcome. End summary.

12. (C) ConGen Istanbul's NEA Iran Watcher met September 24 with Ihsan Ozbek (please protect), the pastor of the Kurtulus Protestant Church in Ankara, reportedly Turkey's largest Protestant evangelical church. Ozbek also serves as Chairman of the Alliance of Protestant Churches in Turkey and on the board of the "Foursquare Evangelical Church", a worldwide evangelical organization headquarters in California. Ozbek, a Consulate contact on religious freedom issues, recently returned from a visit to Iran in his capacity as the Middle East coordinator for the Foursquare Missions' global outreach. (According to Ozbek, the Assyrian Pentecostal church in Iran is affiliated with the Foursquare Evangelical Church.)

Assyrian Pentecostal Christian Churches in Iran Closed

13. (C) Ozbek described the Assyrian Christian community in Iran, a population estimated around 20,000, as diverse and divided. The community is comprised of a number of denominational churches that more often treat each other as competitors and rivals rather than supporters or co-religionists. The Assyrian religious community includes the orthodox Assyrian Church of the East, as well as Assyrian Anglican, Evangelical, Presbyterian, and Assemblies of God churches. According to Ozbek, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church has three to four thousand members in Iran, located in three main locations: Tehran, Urmia, and Kermanshah. The Tehran Church -- called the Shahrara Church -- is the largest, with seven to eight hundred members.

14. (C) Ozbek told us that in mid-March, Majles member Jonathan Betkolia (who holds the one Majles seat reserved specifically for the Assyrian community's representative) asked Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Court to order the Assyrian Pentecostal Churches to close. Accompanied by several dozen police and Interior Ministry officials, Betkolia delivered the closure notice in person to the Shahrara Church's pastor, Victor Tamraz, seizing the keys to the church and installing new locks on the doors. Interior Ministry police also closed the churches in Urmia and Kermanshah. The court's closure order asserted that the churches were allowing non-Assyrians to attend services, and that in the course of such services church pastors including Tamraz were preaching to and converting Iranian Muslims. According to Ozbek, the Shahrara Church had been offering services in Farsi since 2000, in addition to its traditional Aramaic-language services. Majles member Betkolia reportedly told Tamraz that the courts will only allow the church to resume operations if the church promises only to preach to Assyrian Christians and agrees to bar other Iranians from attending. Pastor Tamraz refused, and the three Pentecostal churches have remained shuttered. Ozbek told us that Pentecostal services since then have occurred in worshippers' homes.

15. (C) Ozbek assessed that Betkolia's involvement in directing the closure of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church may have been motivated in part by a desire to keep the wider Assyrian community as deferential as possible to the regime's strict approach towards "recognized" religious minorities in Iran. According to Ozbek, as long as a recognized Christian church only preaches to believers from its own ethnic and religious community, and forswears preaching to ethnic Persians or anyone born a Muslim, the regime usually leaves

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that church alone.

"How can we re-open without abandoning our principles?"

16. (C) Ozbek traveled to Iran in early September at the request of the Foursquare Evangelical Church headquarters in California to discuss the issue with Tamraz and other Assyrian Pentecostal Church officials. The Shahrara church, with Ozbek and the Foursquare Ministry's support, continues to take the position that it cannot agree to the Islamic Revolutionary Court's demand that it bar non-Assyrian Christians from attending its services. "How can we re-open if we have to abandon our principles to do so?" Instead, Ozbek suggested to Tamraz that the church challenge the closure notice in the Iranian court system as falling beyond the scope of the laws governing church operations. (According to Ozbek, the laws do not explicitly require Christian churches to actively bar individuals or specific groups from attending services, though he acknowledged that Iranian laws do explicitly prohibit proselytizing to and converting Muslims, an act that can be punishable by death.) Ozbek did not think the Assyrian Pentecostal Church would pursue the case in Iranian courts, however, and concluded that the issue was at an impasse.

17. (C) Ozbek solicited our advice, asking if the USG can suggest any steps the church could take that might persuade the regime to allow it to re-open, short of a church promise to bar non-Assyrian Christians from attending services. He said church leaders are not currently interested in generating much attention with NGOs, because they fear that an international media campaign on this specific issue would put the church's future operations at even greater risk. Instead, Ozbek speculated that a quiet diplomatic campaign involving countries that enjoy some influence with Iran, encouraging Iran to allow the re-opening of the church as a confidence-building, humanitarian gesture, would have a slightly higher -- though still small -- likelihood of

success.

Comment

18. (C) Throughout our discussion, Ozbek took pains to acknowledge that unlike some other persecuted groups in Iran such as the Bahai'i community, Assyrian Pentecostal Church members have not recently been subject to direct harassment, detention, torture, or other physical abuse. The nature of the regime's discrimination against the Assyrian Pentecostal church is more institutional, and more focused on enforcing a redline ("don't open your doors to Muslims") that although illegal and arbitrary is at least clear and long-standing. As Ozbek explained to us, because this conflict is driven in part by internal divisions within the Assyrian community, as long as the regime enjoys the cover of a compliant Assyrian Majles member as its spokesperson on this issue it can deny that it is discriminating against the Assyrian Christian community as a whole. Ozbek understands that with the international community focused primarily on Iran's nuclear program and secondarily on the election outcome, protests, and consequences, there is probably little attention or appetite left for a diplomatic campaign to pressure Iran on this "small-scale problem." As a result, Ozbek does not expect a positive resolution in the near-term to the Pentecostal church closures, but he agreed to stay in contact with us on this issue as it develops. End comment.

WIENER